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Representation of Oriental Women in Anthony Burgess's Malayan Trilogy

Abstract: The paper attempts to look at how Oriental women are sexualized, objectified, and Orientalized in Anthony Burgess's Malayan Trilogy. White European men (novelists, poets, missionaries, historians, and other Orientalists), especially during the colonial period, in literature and other cultural writing, indulged in the portrayal of women from the East as sexual objects capable only of seduction, physical attraction, and devious sexual behavior. The language used to introduce Oriental women shows signs of such discrimination. Words like "creature" and "thing" permeate in reference to Oriental women. They are denied not only volition but also voice. An example of such attitude is the Malayan Trilogy of Anthony Burgess. A most interesting thing of such representation is the hierarchical juxtaposition of Oriental women with Western women. The purpose of this paper is to show how identifying particular texts which explicitly exhibit gender and racial imbalances will help critique biased representations.

Keywords: Oriental women, Sexualization, Orientalization, Gender, Prejudiced representation

Martha Nussbaum in her essay “Objectification” defines sexual objectification as a condition wherein “... a human being is regarded and/or treated as an object, in the context of a sexual relationship” (254). While objectification and sexualization of women is a common phenomenon in literature, movies, and also in the real world wherever sexual positioning of men and women is a given, the situation of Oriental women with regard to white men and as opposed to white women presents a specific case, for the determining specific is exoticization and Orientalization. As Rana Kabbani in her book Europe’s Myths of Orient points out, the Oriental women are “doubly demeaned (as women and as ‘Orientals’) ...” (7). While women in general are gazed at as sexual objects provided to be consumed by men, Oriental women are treated as inherently lascivious, licentious, and lewd. It is not simply an imposition of male sexual desire, as is in the case of women in general, but ascription of a hyperbolic sensuality as inborn to Oriental women. The portrayal of the Eastern woman as a perpetually enamored and excessively libidinous temptress is a common *topos* in most European literature wherever there is an encounter between the East and the West, and it is true in the case of Anthony Burgess’s Malayan Trilogy too.

Originally published as three novels, *Time for a Tiger* (1956), *The Enemy in the Blanket* (1958), and *Beds in the East* (1959) the Malayan Trilogy is inspired by Anthony Burgess’s experiences as a Colonial Education Officer in Malaya. The Oriental world as represented in the Trilogy, of which the Malaya of 1950s is the setting, is populated by Malayan, Chinese, and Indian women, and an inordinate amount of the Trilogy is devoted to the description of the “woman of the East”. She is characterized as a seductress known for her brimming sexuality, bewitching physical attraction, voluptuousness, and an unceasing endeavor to achieve conjugal consummation with the much-lusted for white man. She can even go to the lengths of drugging him to achieve her goal of salaciousness.

The Oriental woman is constantly looked at, rendered, and commented upon by at least four white European male representatives in the Malayan Trilogy. Firstly it is the third person omniscient narrator of the happenings, events, and people in the story. Secondly it is the protagonist, Victor Crabbe around whose exploits and experiences the story revolves. Thirdly it is the white male exemplar of the rest of the white male characters in the novels who strangely exhibit similar opinions and attitudes to the Oriental woman as the narrator and the protagonist. And finally it is Anthony Burgess himself, upon reading whose two-volume autobiography—Little Wilson and Big God and You've Had Your Time—one can see remarkable resemblance between the narrative persona and Victor Crabbe, the protagonist of the Trilogy. To conform to the way they are looked at, Oriental women take the form of dancing girls, prostitutes, bar maids, and divorcees who are on the constant sensual lookout for white men and, occasionally, women. Even women of education and social status are conceived of as alluring and seductive. Burgess says, “In one Malayan school I knew, the sole Chinese woman teacher seduced the white teaching wives, broke up all their marriages, and induced a male and a female suicide. Chinese men, so Chinese women seemed to believe, were not useful in bed” (Little 386).

The Oriental female appears strangely attractive to the male narrator of the Trilogy and a minute anatomical description of her body ensues. Her being is constantly judged on the basis of her body's sexiness or ugliness. Since the body of the Oriental woman is the primary thing the white man witnesses, he forms her mind according to his judgment of her body, and engraves her body on her mind. All that is mental, intellectual, and spiritual to the being of the Oriental woman is relegated to her body as seen by the white man. Burgess himself shows profound enthusiasm in the description of the Oriental female body:

A Malay female body, musky, shapely golden-brown, was always a delight. Malay women rarely ran to fat... Malay women kept their figures after childbirth through a kind

of ritual roasting over an open fire, tightly wrapped in greased winding-sheets. They walked proudly in sarongs and bajus (little shaped coats) their glossy hair permanently waved, their heels high. They were seductive as few white women are. (Little 385)

Burgess not only sexualizes the Oriental woman but also feminizes the Orient. For him the East itself is a bawdy resort where all his physical needs will be eternally satisfied because it is the Orient and the Oriental women that are internally capable of offering gratification for his orgasmic fantasies. He begrudges the presence of his wife with him and longs to escape into the warm loins of the East. He sees no difference between the East and the Eastern woman when he says:

I would sweat and drink gin pahits and taste the varied sexual resources of the East. I resented my wife, as all men going East have to. The memsahibs ruined the Empire through failing to understand India... I resented my wife. I wandered Singapore and was enchanted. I picked up a Chinese prostitute on Bugis Street. We went to a filthy hotel de passe full of the noise of hawking and spitting, termed by the cynical the call of the East. I entered her and I entered the territory. (Little 373)

It is only the Oriental woman who can supply him erotic elation. No other woman can do it—not a western woman and certainly not his own British wife—because he presumes that the Oriental woman's ability to deliver steamy bodily pleasures as constitutional, intrinsic, and hard-wired in her body, psyche, and culture. For Burgess the Eastern female, because she belongs to the land of Kamasutra, must be an expert in the art of dalliance. He says,

It was Indian women who, as one would expect from the serious Sanskrit amatory manuals, disclosed most knowledge of the techniques of inducing transport, for themselves and for their partners, of renewing desire more times than the frame seemed capable of supporting, of relating enjoyment to strenuous athletics, and leaving the male body a worn-out rag tenuously clinging to a spiritualized sensorium open-eyed in heaven.

I had sexual encounters with Tamil women blacker than African, including a girl who could not have been older than twelve, but none with Bengalis or Punjabis. Whatever her race, the Eastern sexual partner's allure was always augmented by the ambience of spice from the spice-shops, the rankness of the drains, the intense heat of the day, the miracle of transitory coolness at sundown, with the coppersmith birds hammering away at tree-trunks and the fever-bird emitting its segment at scale-sometimes three notes, sometimes four. (Little 373)

Very much like Burgess Victor Crabbe, the central character of the Malayan Trilogy, goes to Malay from England as a resident master and history teacher at the Mansor School. He strikes up a relationship with Rahima, a divorcee dace-hostess in Paradise Cabaret and mother of a small boy, while his wife Fenella spends her time sleeping long all day in their residence believing that Crabbe has gone off to school meetings. Crabbe offers occasional money to Rahima and utilizes her sexually and feels "... in her small room, that he was somehow piercing to the heart of the country, of the East itself" (Time 38). When matters go out of hand and people start talking about the affair, Rahima proposes to Crabbe that they should run away and live together. Crabbe refuses this because he is afraid of losing his wife and job. He also tells her that he cannot afford to give her money any more. When she fears that the White master is trying to get rid of her, she approaches his epicene servant Ibrahim with a phial containing a magical potion that can possibly restore love. The plan is, however, bungled by the stupidity of Ibrahim.

Another chimerical Oriental character is the forty-two year old 'Che Normah. Rupert Hardman, an unsuccessful and struggling English lawyer, marries her solely for the sake of her money. He hates her temper, possessiveness, and domestic domination. Although she loves him dearly he abhors her and she eventually becomes a victim of his rejection. Normah has had two White husbands previously and Hardman becomes her third husband. In the

Enemy in the Blanket she is portrayed as a siren-like creature that lures innocent white men into boisterous marriages and ultimately destroys them. Ironically such portrayal always takes place under the guise of deceptive admiration for her character.

'Che Normah was a good Malay and a good Muslim. That is to say, her family was Achinese and came from Northern Sumatra and she herself liked to wear European dress occasionally, to drink stout and pink gin and to express ignorance about the content of the Koran. The Achinese are proverbially hot-blooded and quick on the draw, but the only knives 'Che Normah carried were in her eyes and her tongue. She gave the lie to the European superstition – chiefly a missionary superstition – that the women of the East are down-trodden. Her two husbands – the first Dutch and the second English – had wilted under her blasts of unpredictable passion and her robust sexual demands. The Communist bullets that had rendered her twice a widow had merely anticipated, in a single violent instant, what attrition would more subtly have achieved. (Enemy 232)

Of all the Oriental women in the Trilogy Rosemary Michael suffers the most fateful treatment. She is depicted as a promiscuous nymph who flaunts her lustrous body to charm anybody with a little talent and position. She is in love with an English soldier named Joe. He promises her marriage and goes off to England, only to cheat her. She keeps waiting for him while being wooed and courted by many a man. Joe marries another woman at home and sends Rosemary a very casual letter asking her to take it easy. Instantaneously Rosemary is shown as changing her attitude and trying to tempt Crabbe and the young Chinese musical prodigy Loo. Here too Rosemary's mind is pathetically reduced to her body, her frailties are ascribed to her being an Oriental, and the behavior of White men to her is justified.

The perfection of her beauty was absurd. The lack of flaw was a kind of deformity. It was not possible to say what racial type of beauty she exemplified: the eyes, black, were all East ☐ houris, harems, beds scented with Biblical spices; nose and lips were pan-

Mediterranean. Her body, clad now in a wide-skirted, crisp imported model, was that of the Shulamite and Italian film stars. The décolletage, with its promise of round, brown, infinitely smooth, vertiginous sensual treasure, was a torment to the blood. Yet only to the white man were these treasures revealed, for Rosemary could not stand the touch of brown fingers. The list of her lovers was formidable, ranging from the District Officer to the manager of the local Cold Storage. Many had promised marriage, but all had gone home, the promise unfulfilled. For Rosemary had little to offer, except her body, her fragments of training college learning, her ability to arrange flowers, and her quite considerable capacity for all kinds of sensual pleasure. She desperately wanted marriage with a European, but she didn't want marriage without love. Love, of course, was the familiar hoarse entreaty after the evening's drinking, and Rosemary would quickly enough yield to the entreaty, hearing the love grow hoarser and more urgent and thinking too, 'How can he fail to go on wanting me forever once he knows what I'm capable of giving?' And true, the men did go on wanting her for a long time, till the end of the tour or till transfer or till Rosemary's voice □ inexpertly Sloane Square after much drinking □ made them cringe with embarrassment. And other things got them down □ her inordinate passion for Worcester sauce, her wanting to be wanted all the time, her tears, tears which didn't humanize her face by making it pathetically ugly but just made it not a face at all, her lack of 'reality-control' (she just didn't literally know whether she was lying or telling the truth). (Beds 388)

Whereas the Oriental woman is full of sensuality and devoid of all other kinds of aspiration and finer sensibilities, the white woman always pines for civilization, culture, freedom, art, and exercise of freewill. Fenella, Victor Crabbe's second wife and one of the two prominent white female characters set against a good number of their Oriental

counterparts, reads and writes poetry, watches European cinema, appreciates art, weather, wine, and politeness and dignity in men:

She had on the bed side table a jug of tepid water which had, an hour ago, been ice. There was also a bottle of gin and a saucer containing sliced limes...At the foot of the table was a copy of Persuasion, a volume of John Betjeman's poems and a work of literary criticism by Professor Cleanth Brooks. In her slightly trembling hands she had just been holding the day's issue of the Timah Gazette...She had been interested to read that a Film Society had just been inaugurated at Timah, and that there would be a meeting once a fortnight.

The first films scheduled were: The Battleship Potemkin; The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari; Sang d'un poete; Metropolis; Les Visiteurs du Soir...She felt that in Timah there must be people of her own kind, people who would discuss books, ballet and music. (Time 54)

Fenella detests the East and longs to back to England. For her the East is all about "Scabby children, spitting pot-bellied shopkeepers, terrorists, burglars, scorpions, those blasted flying-beetles. And the noise of the radios and the eternal shouting." She wonders, "Are they all deaf or something?" Where is this glamorous East they talk about?" (Time 34).

She says, "We are all Europeans in Europe... We can't live like the Asians" (Time 58).

Thinking that the East is "just a horrible sweating travesty of Europe," she eventually abandons her husband, Victor Crabbe, and moves away to England to become a poet. Still she is remembered by Crabbe as an elegant woman who exercised free will, and respected for that.

Ann Talbot is a significant White female character in The Enemy in the Blanket. She is the wife of Mr. Talbot, the State Education Officer. She is a painter and artist herself. She is perpetually irritated by her husband's inordinate hunger and eccentric eating habits. She has an affair with Victor Crabbe, and does not want to disclose this relationship to her husband because she promises Crabbe that she believes that the relationship is purely physical. But her

infidelity is strangely justified without any logic. One feels like such partiality is solely owing to Anne's European identity. When she realizes that she cannot continue her affair with Crabbe in secrecy any longer, and that she can no longer go back to her husband, she runs away with another white man. When the affair is revealed to him, Talbot is enraged and promises to Crabbe that he will kill both of them. But Crabbe consoles him and tries to justify Anne's decision of finding her own path. Although the ordeals of women like Rahima, 'Che Normah, and Rosemary Michael are the same as those of Fenella and Anne they are ridiculed and undervalued, and more over characterized as typical of the Oriental nature. One cannot help identifying a chain of being with the white man at the top, the white woman after him, and the Oriental woman on the lowest rung.

In an enthusiastic bibliographical entry about Anthony Burgess, contributed to the first volume of *Makers of Modern Culture*, Philip Gooden, the writer of *The Story of English: How the English Language Conquered the World*, applauded Burgess saying, "His preference for exotic locations for his novels comes from a well-conveyed feeling that countries less temperate, in both senses, than England provide a drawer and more confused material on which to work – even the inertness of the East is made verbally energetic" (81). The most important phrase in the statement is "the inertness of the East." Such statements could be made and such expressions could be used even a quarter of a century after Edward Said definitively stated, ".....the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not there either" (*Orientalism* 4). The European scholar accepts as legitimate categories the unevaluated dichotomies of East and West, and Orient and Occident. Such acceptance is a result of long-established traditions of political, economic, geographical, artistic and cultural totalization, homogenization and alterization. These processes arise from deliberate fictional portrayals and descriptions of places, peoples, and cultures of the Orient for purposes as wide-ranging as imperialistic and colonial domination to providing

entertainment, pleasure, and a sense of exotic wonder to the readers back in the writer's homeland. Attending to such processes writers like Anthony Burgess and critics like Philip Gooden, by making the Orient and the Orientals inert, become conscious or unconscious ideologues of racism, sexism, and above all Orientalism.

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